



**The Bishop's Charge
to the 151st Synod of the Diocese of Niagara
by The Right Reverend Dr. Susan J.A. Bell**

Saturday, November 1, 2025

I speak to you in the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Dear members of Synod, dear people of God:

Here we are once more - gathering as a Synod, to pray together, to discern together, and to give thanks for the movement of God's Spirit among us.

Every year, as I make an accounting of what we've been doing in our beloved diocese, I am reminded of the deep faithfulness, resilience, and generosity that live at its heart. From our small-town churches to our largest urban parishes, from our innovative ministries to our quiet acts of compassion, we are all part of something greater than ourselves: a living, breathing body called into life by God's love and sent into the world to share that love freely and generously.

This year, my accounting includes three interwoven strands — a hymn, a vision statement, and a Gospel story.

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I'm a singer and so hymnody means a great deal to me. You may have noticed that I always, always thank the directors of music in your parishes. I do that because I am very well aware of the importance of music ministry – and sung prayer. In the great hymn-writer Charles Wesley's day, folks used to carry round a pocket hymn book as a collection of what they believed. And Wesley's emphasis on sung prayer was a central feature of a great revival of faith. I like that idea. And so, it wasn't a stretch to look to a hymn for inspiration for our Synod theme: "Take My Life and Let It Be Consecrated, Lord, to Thee."

Frances Ridley Havergal's beautiful hymn, written in 1874, has been sung by countless Christians as a prayer of devotion and offering. It is deceptively simple - but profoundly demanding.

Each verse of the hymn offers up another part of the self: life, hands, voice, silver and gold, intellect, will, heart, love. Line by line, Havergal sketches out what it looks like to surrender not just our Sunday piety, but the whole fabric of our lives to God's purposes.

"Take my life and let it be
consecrated, Lord, to thee."

This hymn is about consecration - about setting something apart for holy use. It's about recognizing that every breath, every gift, every relationship, every resource, is not our possession, but a trust from God.

But it's also about joy. Havergal doesn't write in tones of grim duty, but of delight. She says: "Take my love, my Lord, I pour / at Thy feet its treasure store." The giving of ourselves to God is the way we become free, because what is offered to Love is transformed by Love.

And so, this hymn is not only a personal prayer - it's a communal call. When we, as the Church, sing "Take my life," we are also singing "Take our life" - the life of this diocese, our parishes, our ministries, our common mission - and make them holy. Consecrate us, Lord, for your purpose.

That brings us directly to our diocesan vision statement: "Called to Life - Compelled to Love."

Those six words encapsulate both the grace and the challenge of Christian discipleship - specifically in Niagara.

To be **called to life** is to remember that everything begins with God's initiative. It is God who calls. God who awakens. God who breathes life into dry bones. God who calls us out of the tombs of fear, complacency, and despair and into the light of resurrection life.

We don't call ourselves. We are called - by name - by the still small voice of love that knows us intimately.

And when we respond to that call, when we bravely say "yes," we're set free to live abundantly - not only for ourselves, but for the sake of the world.

And because that divine call is always an act of love, it leads inevitably to the second part: we are **compelled to love**.

Because love is simply not optional for those who have heard the call of Jesus. It's the natural overflow of a heart touched by grace.

To be compelled to love is not to be coerced, but to be moved - moved by compassion, by gratitude, by a recognition of seeing Jesus' face in every person we meet.

And this vision statement of ours, like Havergal's hymn, is both personal and corporate. It speaks to the transformation of our own hearts, but also to the renewal of our common life - a diocese that lives its calling and bears witness to God's love in a time when we are hungry for hope.

John's Gospel also captures that call and response beautifully.

John the Baptist is standing with two of his disciples. Jesus passes by, and John says simply, "Behold, the Lamb of God." That short testimony - just five words - changes everything.

The two disciples follow Jesus. He turns and asks the question that still echoes through every generation: "What are you looking for?"

They reply, "Rabbi, where are you staying?"
And Jesus says, "Come and see."

That invitation - come and see - is the beating heart of discipleship.

Jesus doesn't begin with dogma or demand. He begins with relationship. He invites them into his life, into his presence, into a shared journey.

They come; they see - and everything changes.

Andrew goes and finds his brother Simon. Philip finds Nathanael and the pattern of discipleship begins: encounter leads to testimony, which leads to more encounters. One heart touched by Christ awakens another.

One thing's for sure: it's not about perfection. Nathanael starts with skepticism - "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" — but even in doubt, Jesus sees his potential, calls him by name, and promises that he will see "greater things than these."

That's the movement of grace: seeing, being seen, being sent.

That's what I love most about this Gospel passage: the way Jesus truly sees people. He looks at Simon and says, "You are Simon, son of John. You will be called Cephas." He looks at Nathanael and says, "Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit."

Jesus names them not only as they are, but as they will become: the Rock upon whom the Church will be built and the one who will represent the honest transmission of faith.

Jesus sees not only the present reality, but the divine possibility within each person.

And that, friends, is how we are called to see one another in this diocese: through the lens of God's generosity and expansive imagination for us; and not through the lens of past limitation, but through the eyes of holy imagination. To be called to life is to be seen in this way - to be recognized and loved into possibility.

And to be compelled to love is to turn that gaze outward - to see others as Christ sees them: beloved, gifted, redeemable, capable of transformation, and full of hope.

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Now, if we hold these three strands together - Havergal's hymn, our vision statement, and this Gospel story - a beautiful pattern emerges.

Each calls us to a life of consecration, a life of offering and response.

Jesus' words, "Come and see," are another way of saying, "Take your life, and let it be consecrated."

Come - bring your gifts, your fears, your joys, your questions - and see what God can do with them.

For Havergal, consecration begins with surrender:

"Take my moments and my days,
let them flow in ceaseless praise."

For us, in this time and place, consecration might mean something like this:
Take our buildings and let them be spaces of welcome.
Take our resources and let them serve your mission.
Take our hearts and let them burn again with holy love.

Consecration isn't about giving up life; it's about giving life back to the One who gave it in the first place - and finding, in that giving, the joy of renewal - of being called to life in a changing church.

We are living in a time of enormous change - in the Church and in the world. The landscape of faith is shifting beneath our feet.

We're generally smaller, budgets are generally tighter, and the world outside our doors is, to be honest, less certain of what the Church is for in these times. And yet, I believe this is not a time for handwringing, but for deep listening - for hearing again that call to life.

The Spirit is doing a new thing among us. It looks different than before - but that's kind of the point about renewal - the Spirit is calling us to do new things.

So, as we look ahead — as we dream, plan, and pray for the life of this diocese — what are we discerning from the Spirit's leading?

Well, I guess the first thing is that the diocesan Mission Action Plan – our MAP – is doing what it's designed to do: keeping us accountable to our own discernment.

In the convening circular you can read Dr. Emily Hill's excellent MAP report. But let me highlight just a few things from it: last year we appointed a faith formation coordinator and by God's grace - and her hard work, The Rev'd Monica Romig-Green has begun a good work among us; resourcing parishes and exploring new avenues of theological and pastoral inquiry. She's pioneering a new Grandparents resource that I'm excited about, that explores discipleship for those who are in this season of life and the transmission of the faith from generation to generation – from grandparent to parent and child. This kind of bespoke ministry is foundational to our growth in these times. Please avail yourselves of Monica's wisdom and help. Christian education and spiritual engagement are so important.

And on that topic, the Niagara School for Missional Leadership strengthens its focus and enrollment every year. We are now in the fourth year of the NSML's existence and are in a fruitful partnership with the Faculty of Theology at Huron University College. The consolidation of the school is due to the solid work of Sarah Bird our registrar and Dr. Emily Hill – our parish development missionary. I am deeply grateful to all those in our diocese who have taken a chance and enrolled in a course. Special mention goes to St. Luke's, Smithville who have a group taking a course together!

And our social justice engagement has been a steady drumbeat beneath our diocesan life: 2SLGBTQIA+ advocacy continues through the Rainbow Kings and Queens and also in a general posture of support, an emphasis by Climate Justice Niagara on the Communion Forest initiative, education and advocacy about human trafficking and other work that comes under Deirdre Pike's justice and outreach portfolio are important ways that we stay engaged with the needs of our world. Our MAP is helping us stay focused, vital and motivated to keep bringing all these things into the future.

We're being called to keep listening for ways to take care of the young people entrusted to us. The mental health crisis we've seen in recent years has left us with a desire to provide some spiritual support for our youth who are facing a bunch of things we never had to face growing up. Science shows that spirituality benefits mental health and spiritual beliefs and practices foster connection and meaning. And of course, we know this – we got there before the scientists!

Again, Sarah Bird has been hard at work resourcing leaders for this ministry. Children, Youth and Family Ministry (CYFM) remains a vital, identity-defining ministry for our diocese. We're known for it and Sarah has led this portfolio

with great energy and skill. And it's also for this reason that the idea of a new monastic, contemplative community – St. Brigid's - primarily aimed at 18-35 year olds but with support from all ages, of course, has taken shape under the guidance of our diocesan community missionary, Canon Ian Mobsby, and a small group of like-minded, Anglicans who are committed to upholding this focus on young people are supporting this ministry with creativity and generosity.

We're being called to a renewed and intentional approach to stewardship. It's about taking care first and foremost of our faith, then taking care of our relationships, then taking care of the vision we have for Christian community and then, and only then, paying attention to money – because that makes the other stuff take concrete shape. The reality is: from faith comes the impulse to love, from love comes the impulse to serve and nurture and our resources make that care and nurturing possible. It's not really about money. Money is merely the means by which we procure the things we need to care for the hungry, the naked, and the oppressed. It's necessary, but it's not an end in itself. Joining the mission of God is an end in itself.

And it's clear we're being called to that mission – by God's grace, we will have designated 4 missions by the end the year.

We're being called to talk about a mixed ecology church. You'll hear more about both of these movements of the Spirit during our Synod later.

We're being called to respond in concrete actionable ways to make the name of Jesus known in feeding the hungry and clothing the naked. So many of our parishes have heard this call and responded: the Cathedral Café in Hamilton, the Silvercreek Community Market in Guelph, the hygiene and food bank in Welland, the breakfast program in St. Catharines, Open Doors in Burlington, and on and on and on the list could go. These are just a few examples of how we are joining God's mission and reaching out in love where the need is greatest. I feel very proud of the ways in which our diocese is responding to human need.

We're being called to mission-shape our leadership: The NSML is, of course, all about this and the ripple effect is wonderful to behold. And the 150th Anniversary Diocesan Curacy Fund aims to do this as well. As it stands today, we have enough funds to allow me to support the stipend of half a curate every year. We are making progress and I am so deeply grateful to those who have donated and raised money for this crucial fund. Now there's a ways to go, so please keep the fund in your hearts and minds if you're thinking of supporting leadership in our diocese. It's truly demonstrating faith in the future as we shape our leaders for the Church for long years to come.

We are being called to uphold the equality and gifts of women – this has been brought into particular focus for us with the appointment of the first woman Archbishop of Canterbury, Bishop Sarah Mulally.

I could go on telling you what we're being called to, but this, members of Synod, is just some of what it means to be called to life – and to trust that God has much for us to do yet. This is what it is to be compelled to love - that's our challenge and our gift in this moment.

I also want to assure us all that these acts aren't here today, gone later today. No - they're permanent reflections of our core value of love – and not the easy kind. The hard kind – the kind that says even if we don't like it, even if it makes us uncomfortable, we do it anyway because according to the light of the Gospel it's the right thing to do. The Gospel changes us for good.

Through these acts the Gospel is being proclaimed, lives are still being touched, and hope is still being born.

And while the world seems to pull apart and the rhetoric of fear and division grows louder every day, the Church's witness must be unmistakable. We must proclaim with harmony and hope that we are people of love.

Love that listens.
 Love that welcomes.
 Love that serves.
 Love that is abundant.
 Love that speaks truth in compassion.

To be compelled to love is to move beyond comfort. It means loving those who may never love us back. It means standing with the vulnerable, welcoming the stranger, and seeking peace even when it costs us something.

This, too, is consecration — offering our hearts for the healing of the world. None of this work is ours alone. It is the Spirit's work in us.

Just as Jesus called those first disciples not one by one into solitude, but into community, so we are called together - as the Body of Christ in Niagara.

Our ministries differ, but our mission is one. We are knit together by baptismal grace, strengthened by the Eucharist, sustained by prayer, and sent out in service of God's mission of love.

When we gather around the table of Christ, we are reminded that consecration is not a one-time act, but a continual rhythm: receiving, blessing, breaking, giving.

That is the pattern of the Christian life - and of our diocesan life. We receive God's grace. We bless it with gratitude. We break it open through service. And we give it back to the world.

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In John's Gospel, when Jesus calls Philip, Philip immediately goes to find Nathanael. He doesn't have all the answers; he simply says, "Come and see."

That's our call too.

We don't have to have everything figured out. We just have to be willing to invite - to point others toward the One who gives life - and crucially, to listen along the way for where God wants us to go next - and next - and next. We are always being beckoned onward by the Spirit. That's the life of faith: to go forward to meet Christ, not perfectly, but faithfully.

That's the space we're in - and we use words like missional and mixed ecology to describe the process of recapturing of a sense of adventure about our faith where we listen for what we think we hear God is saying: we try something and we evaluate how we've been able to live the Gospel. If it is of God, it will flourish. That's the pattern of being faithful - and I hope, once this way of being church is firmly in our bloodstream, that we can also dwell in a sense of joy about it as well.

You see, we're coming through a stressful time - and a lot of that stress has centred on a decline in parishioners and also a decline in resources - just at a time when the costs of living as a community have risen. Add to that a Pandemic and you can see why we've been stressed.

But things are changing. You remember last year that I shared with you some statistics about the rise in average Sunday attendance particularly at Easter and Christmas? Good news. This year I can share with you some more:

- Our average Sunday Attendance across the diocese grew by 18% year over year.
- And we saw further growth for Easter - a modest 9% increase while our Christmas numbers held steady.

Now these are solid statistics; and our reach likely goes well beyond them as we don't currently measure for online attendance.

And - we have the first budget since 2019 which is balanced and not on the back of a sale of property. Our recovery is also reflected in a 10% increase in our DM&M.

Now folks, that's a significant improvement in our station.

And all in the context of a gently adventurous spirit and risk-taking in our diocesan missions and ministries, increasing a bit here and a bit there and welcoming things like the maturation of our missions who are now striving to give back to the diocese the investment we've made in them. This is a good development and will, in time, cumulatively make it possible for us to plant more new communities when we are so prompted by the Holy Spirit.

It's almost like the Spirit is out ahead of us, beckoning us to take baby steps – “come on, you can do it.”

And you know, we can. We can do it. With faith. And hope. And love.

Now look, it doesn't mean everything is rosy. Not everything has improved – as well many of you know. We still have plenty of challenges – mostly with regard to discipleship - and stewardship as a part of discipleship. And we're working on that.

But the fact is, something is happening. And in that we must rejoice together.

You know, one of my best friends, when she detects the movement of the Spirit, always says “Aslan is on the move” – a shorthand reference of course to the great lion and Christ figure at the centre of C.S. Lewis' Chronicles of Narnia.

So I think that we can say together that “Aslan is on the move” in Niagara.

Of course, we know that we aren't sent out alone; we're accompanied by the same Spirit who anointed Jesus, the same Spirit who has sustained this diocese for the last 150 years, from generation to generation, and will do so long into the future. As we say in one of our diocesan prayers – we partner with the Holy Spirit.

Together, we are co-creators with God of the kingdom and none of this happens without each other. In that spirit, I want to take a moment now to recognize some leaders in our diocese whose service I want to uphold and lift before us as honorary canons.

Cheryl Barker, rector of St. George's in Georgetown.
And Will Alakas, rector of St. Columba's, St. Catharines.

Cheryl and Will have served our diocese long and faithfully and have taken their place in the councils of the church. Both have distinguished themselves by their love for their parishes and by their support of the diocese as a whole. I am delighted, with our Dean, Tim Dobbin, to make them honorary canons of our cathedral. Congratulations Canon Barker, Canon Alakas. And our grateful thanks for your continued service.

Now to thank our staff. Every year at Synod I struggle to put into words the profound gratitude that I feel toward them. Your diocesan and cathedral staff work hard to support you – to come alongside you – to find solutions to the problems you might need help with – to walk with you in times of joy and in times of challenge. Their hearts are for you – and so I want to say thank you to them all. To Shannon, Hannah and Dani; Deirdre, Sarah, Monica, Emily and Ian; Kim, Laurie, Mark, and Debbie; Lorna, Derek, Turner and Pieter; Karen and Bruce. Thank you for all your efforts on behalf of us all – and may God bless you as you continue to partner to build the kingdom here in Niagara.

I particularly want to say thank you to Canon Drew McDonald, who will be concluding three years of ministry with us as of mid-November, capably guiding the diocese through a period of discernment regarding a major financial campaign and supporting parishes with their stewardship initiatives. His focus on holistic discipleship and Christian education has been a blessing to many across our diocese and I am grateful for his wisdom and experience. We'll miss him – although he will still be available to consult at the bishop's request.

And as ever, I'd like to thank Jane Wyse, whose value is above rubies. I cannot imagine the episcopal office without her wise – no pun intended – kind, and efficient, care of us – and me. She is a blessing to us all.

And members of Synod, I'd like to thank - on my behalf and on yours – your Secretary of Synod and our Archdeacon of Niagara, Bill Mous. Now anyone who has had any dealings with Bill can attest to the fact that he is as pastorally kind as he is knowledgeable and gifted in the administration of the diocese. He is most certainly a gift to me.

I am also tremendously grateful for our chancellor, Canon Greg Tweney. Greg's gifts have been acknowledged beyond the borders of our diocese too – this year he became the obvious choice to be the next chancellor of our province as well. Greg is wise and full of care for Niagara, and we in turn are so thankful for his support.

And I am very grateful for the presence and ministry of Archbishop Colin Johnson. He is known far and wide in the Canadian church for his wisdom and experience and I am so glad that he is sharing both with Niagara.

And members of Synod it is just a joy to work with our Dean, Tim Dobbin. Tim is a fine rector of Christ's Church Cathedral and a most diligent and wise Dean. We are all very blessed by his leadership.

Likewise, may I say that our treasurer's work on our behalf is so very fine. Christine Morrow consistently goes above and beyond and never more so than this year which was challenging in terms of infrastructure and transition. I try to thank her on a weekly basis for her many gifts and skills.

You know they say, there is no greater blessing in professional life than to work with your friends. And I feel very blessed to work in such a team of friends for the good of our diocesan family – I thank all these folks from the bottom of my heart, and I hope you will too as you meet them in the context of our ministries together.

So, members of Synod, let our prayer echo Havergal's:
 "Take my life, and let it be
 consecrated, Lord, to Thee."

Take our parishes, our missions, and our chaplaincies - their history, their hope, their potential - and consecrate them.

Take our leaders - lay and ordained - and consecrate them.

Take our hearts - wounded, joyful, courageous - and consecrate them.

Take this diocese - your Church in Niagara - and make it wholly yours.

Let us be a people who live our calling joyfully, and who love generously.

Let us be a diocese that embodies resurrection — called to life, compelled to love, such as we are.

Havergal's hymn sings the same holy melody as Isaiah's "Here am I; send me." Both arise from awe before God's glory and they lead to the joyful surrender of ourselves for divine purpose. Havergal's hymn translates Isaiah's vision into the language of daily discipleship — offering every heartbeat, every word, every act as worship. God's grace transforms trembling into trust. This is the call of consecration: to see, to hear, and to respond with love, allowing our lives to become God's song.

"Take my life and let it be consecrated, Lord, to Thee."

Called to life.

Compelled to love.

For the sake of the Gospel,
and for the healing of the nations.

Thanks be to God. **Amen.**